

Everyone's Favourite GRANDPA!



UNFORGETTABLE

His classic Bengali looks and phenomenal talent made him the face of the '40s and the '50s. In the popular consciousness he lives on as Dadamoni, the grand old man of Hindi films. His passing away spells the end of an era, but it leaves behind celluloid images and memories of a life well lived. CB pays tribute to Ashok Kumar...

How can one ever forget "Main ban ki panchchi, ban ke ban ban dolu re..." or "Rail gaadi..." or even a "Babu samjho ishara...", which have become an integral part of our lives?

Ashok Kumar Ganguly, lovingly known as Dadamoni, had completed more than three decades in an industry, which suddenly feels a lit-

tle colder with his demise...

And to think that Ashok Kumar, a law student in Calcutta, had come to Mumbai dreaming of becoming a director! Life took another turn when he was forced to play the leading role in veteran director Himanshu Rai's *Achhut Kanya*. The film marked the emergence of socially committed films. He played the role of a Brahmin boy who falls in love with an untouchable girl. The film was a runaway success and Dadamoni was stuck for life.

Before long the director had convinced him to do *Jeevan Naiya*. Ashok Kumar reminisced how, after seeing the film in Calcutta, his mother refused to speak to him for days because acting in films then was considered fit only for those coming from the lowest strata of society.

Though his mother eventually came around, she still feared that no respectable family would agree to give their daughter's hand in marriage to her son. True enough, all doors were closed on him. To console her he said, "Mother, I'm earning Rs.300-Rs.400 currently. The day I start earning Rs.500, I'll get married." This gave him time but not for long. One day, he received a telegram asking him to rush home. On arriving he was told that his wedding had been fixed. He married Shobha Banerjee, a pretty girl, 15 years his junior.

Career-wise, Ashok Kumar scaled newer heights with films like Mehboob Khan's *Nazm* and *Humayun* (Nargis played the second lead in this film). This made him so popular that there came a time when Roxy theatre would only screen his films continuously! He fondly recalled the time he was invited as a guest of the Chief Justice of Lahore. "We had boarded a train from Delhi at 8 p.m. which was to reach Lahore the following morning. At every station the train pulled in at, we were greeted by hordes of people on the platform just waiting for a glimpse of me. There wasn't an inch of empty space on the platform!"

During his first decade in the industry, Ashok Kumar did barely seven or eight films, after which he joined Filmistan Studios. He produced his first

film titled *Eight Days*, which was acclaimed as a great comedy but bombed at the box-office. Unfazed, he took over as executive producer of Bombay Talkies. Films like *Majboor*, *Ziddi*, *Mahal*, *Maashuul* and *Parineeta* followed. He had introduced younger brother Kishore Kumar as a musician in *Ziddi*. He had seven jubilees in a row.

He went on to set up Ashok Kumar Productions which made a few films like *Maa*, *Kalpana*, *Meri Soorat Teri Aankhen* and *Samaj*.

While doing these films he became deeply involved with production and acting took a backseat. However, he was back in the reckoning with films like *Afsana* with Bina Rai, *Deedar* with Dilip and Nargis, *Saangram* with Nalini and *Mahal* with Madhubala.

Leela Chitnis and Devika Rani with whom he did ten films, were as good as his permanent co-stars. Naturally, everyone presumed he was romantically involved with both but he always claimed that "Devika Rani was my boss (Himanshu Rai)'s wife and Leela was just a good co-star". However, he never denied his affair with Nalini Jaywant although it was also true that his only true love was his wife Shobha.

Ashok Kumar was said to be reserved with his female co-stars since most of his heroines were years younger than him... "I was years older than these girls. Even when I was 52, I looked just 38 and so I continued to get roles as the leading man!" he would chuckle. He would remember Meena Kumari, with whom he did 12 films together, with more than a touch



A friendship that dates back to the 'Gumrah' days—Ashok Kumar With Sunil Dutt.



He didn't have a single photograph of his wedding ceremony. One day, on a chance trip to Chor Bazar, he found this copy staring at him, which he immediately bought for Rs.200/-

of poignancy... "She was one woman who wanted to be loved. She drank very heavily and was always sad."

He also did 18 films with Nirupa Roy. "I remember when she was cast opposite me in *Karigar*, the director was offended because he felt she couldn't act. But I didn't blame her. After all, she had been acting only in mythologicals before. I showed her how to enact her scenes and after three days, she was okay." He also did films with Suraiya, Nargis, Nutan and others.

Apart from critical acclaim Ashok Kumar also bagged several popular awards. He received the National award for *Gumrah* in 1959 from the then President Dr. Rajendra Prasad. He bagged the National award yet again for Hrishidaa's *Aashirwad* in 1968.

Naturally his career was crowned by many cinematic jewels. *Bandini* with Nutan is considered a masterpiece even today. He also has to his credit the first real blockbuster of India: *Kismet* which ran for over a year in which he played the first real anti-hero of popular cinema. His girl-shy role in *Chalti Ka Naam Gaudi*, the black man with a golden voice in *Meri Soorat Teri Aankhen*, the dignified nawab in *Mere Mehboob*, the mysterious murderer in *Jewel Thief*, the lovable Parsi in *Khatta Meetha*, the effervescent old man in *Khubsoorat* and the revolting romantic in *Shaukeen* can be counted amongst his best contributions to Indian cinema.

Survived by his son Arup Kumar Ganguly and two daughters, including actress Preeti Ganguly, the 91-year old actor has left behind a legacy of films that will continue to act as a beacon of entertainment, inspiration and yes, love.

★ Compiled by Shameem I Shah



He maintained a respectable distance from most of his heroines since they were years younger than him—With Madhubala